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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2143

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RHMFIS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000544

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/22/2016

TAGS: IS LE PGOV PREL PTER SY

SUBJECT: MGLE01: FM SALLOUKH HELPFUL ON UNSC DEMARCHE,  
LESS SO ON HAMAS AND MUQTADA AL SADR

REF: A. SECSTATE 27174

1B. SECSTATE 27111

1C. SECSTATE 12817

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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11. (C) Foreign Minister Salloukh defended meeting with Hamas officials as important in maintaining normal relations with a democratically-elected Arab government. He urged the USG to give Hamas an opportunity to change its behavior, which he believed would happen as it struggled to meet its new responsibilities. Concerning the visit of Iraqi militia leader Muqtada al-Sadr, the Foreign Minister finessed the issue by claiming al-Sadr was simply a religious leader who deserved an audience. Salloukh disingenuously insisted the GOL was not empowering al-Sadr with high level access (meetings at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Higher Shia Council), but refused to disclose the subjects discussed during a February 21 meeting with the militant Shia leader. Salloukh also tried to deflect the Ambassador's remarks concerning USG's extradition request for Mohammed Ali Hamadei and three other TWA 847 hijackers, saying it was a "technical" matter to be decided by the Ministry of Justice, and therefore out of his hands. On a more constructive note, Salloukh said he understood that Guatemala was active in UN peacekeeping missions and would be a constructive member of the UN Security Council (vice Venezuela), but before a final decision could be made he would have to first consult with the Prime Minister. Finally, he expressed surprise that ISF chief, General Ashraf Rifi, had not been able to produce a U.S. citizen minor child who is present in Lebanon and the subject of a long-running custody case. Salloukh said he would ensure that more ISF resources are assigned to the case to return this child to U.S. custody as soon as possible.  
End summary.

12. (SBU) Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh received the Ambassador and poloff on February 21 at the Ministry. Former Lebanese consul general in New York and current ministry advisor, Ramy Moktada, also attended the meeting. Salloukh is one of the five Shia ministers who boycotted the Siniora government for seven weeks from December through early February. Although not a hizballah party member, Salloukh owes his ministerial position to Hizballah.

13. (C) FM Salloukh began the meeting by informing the Ambassador that the government team working on the economic reform package had nearly completed its work and was preparing to submit its proposals to the Council of Ministers

for discussion and approval. Following review by the Council, the reform bill would be submitted to Parliament for debate and a vote. The Foreign Minister believed that this progress, as well as the appointment of a new secretary general for privatization, would provide the necessary groundwork for the upcoming Beirut I donors' conference. Salloukh also said that two experienced jurists, Ralph Riachy and Shukri Sader, would represent Lebanon in discussions with the UN next week on the structure and legal underpinnings of the anticipated international tribunal authorized by UNSCR 1644. On a related matter, Salloukh said he was impressed with the "measured, serious" approach taken by the new UNIIC chief investigator, Serge Brammertz, and was convinced his methodical approach would lead to a determination of those guilty of the crime.

HAMAS

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¶4. (C) Following the Ambassador's explanation of USG policy toward Hamas and the request to refrain from diplomatic dealings with the terrorist organization, Salloukh expressed his belief that Hamas would soon begin to moderate its rhetoric and behavior as it faced for the first time the responsibilities of governance. Salloukh believed it would be helpful if the international community gave the new Palestinian government "a chance" to see whether they would conform to acceptable international behavior. He argued that by all accounts, the Palestinians held free and fair elections and the international community had an obligation to work with whom the Palestinians chose as their representatives. Salloukh said he understood the USG's deep concern that heretofore Hamas had pursued an agenda of violence and obstruction regarding the peace process, but he

BEIRUT 00000544 002 OF 003

felt it was important not to make the situation worse by isolating the new government.

MUQTADA AL-SADR

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¶5. (C) Concerning USG concern over the visit to Beirut of Iraqi militia leader Muqtada al-Sadr, FM Salloukh responded in a similar vein as his responses on Hamas. Without providing any evidence, Salloukh insisted that as-Sadr was no longer calling for armed resistance to coalition forces in Iraq and had somewhere along the line transformed himself into a mere political/religious figure who represented a sizable portion of Iraq's Shia community. When asked to explain the official GOL reception given to someone who was neither an elected nor appointed official, Salloukh downplayed the significance of as-Sadr's visit, saying that he only wanted to hear what as-Sadr had to say about the situation in Iraq and that he was not treating him as an official Iraqi representative. Salloukh stated that as-Sadr had a "fair number" of deputies in the Iraqi national assembly and his views were therefore important. Salloukh also said that since as-Sadr was originally from a village in south Lebanon near Tyre, he may have a perspective that would be beneficial to hear. "We are not endorsing his positions, and he is not being received as an official visitor," remarked Salloukh. As with Hamas, Salloukh said he believed it was better to try to moderate MAS' behavior, concluding with the remark, "...if you isolate him, the damage will be greater." (Note: Muqtada al-Sadr departed Lebanon after one day to return to Iraq in response to the bombing of the Shia mosque in Samarra. End note.)

TWA 847 TERRORISTS

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¶6. (C) While recognizing that the USG's extradition request for the TWA 847 hijackers was well supported by documentation, FM Salloukh (as he has in previous meetings on the subject) argued that the legitimacy of the request was a

"technical" question that fell under the purview of the Ministry of Justice. He said that all documentation provided by the Embassy was being studied, but that a determination was out of his hands. He refused to respond to the Ambassador's questions regarding Lebanon's apparent lack of compliance with international agreements against hijacking and terrorism, and again recommended that such matters be addressed to the Ministry of Justice. Salloukh said he understood the loss suffered by America in this crime, but those losses were not relevant to the legal issue.

U.S. CITIZEN CHILD CUSTODY CASE

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¶7. (SBU) FM Salloukh expressed surprise and perhaps some embarrassment when informed that Internal Security Forces (ISF) chief General Ashraf Rifi had recently told the Ambassador that his forces had "lost track" of a U.S. citizen child residing in the Baalbek region of the Biqa Valley after having her under surveillance. Although Salloukh recognized the complications of ISF operations in the Hizballah-controlled area around Baalbek, he stated that Rifi should have been able to maintain surveillance contact. He told the Ambassador that he would "ensure" Rifi assigns additional resources so that the case can be resolved. When informed (once again) that a Lebanese court had assigned custody to the child's U.S. citizen father who resides in the U.S., Salloukh stated that the case was an embarrassment to Lebanon and he wanted it closed. (Note: Although ISF falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior, the fact that Salloukh is a well-connected member of the Shia community and a senior cabinet minister will presumably make his request carry weight. Embassy Beirut will maintain pressure on both ministries and the Prime Minister to return the child to custody in the U.S. End note.)

UN SECURITY COUNCIL SEAT

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¶8. (C) When asked whether the GOL had made a decision regarding the upcoming election of the Latin American representative to the UN Security Council, FM Salloukh said his government understood the active role Guatemala has played in recent UN peacekeeping operations, as well as its constructive participation in various international conferences. He stated that he is also aware of the disruptive behavior Venezuelan representatives had displayed

BEIRUT 00000544 003 OF 003

in other multilateral meetings, notably at last year's World Summit. A decision, however, regarding Lebanon's vote in the election had not yet been made. Salloukh indicated the government would likely vote for Guatemala's representation, but he would have to first consult with the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers for a final determination.

COMMENT

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¶9. (C) As a minister closely allied to Hizballah, FM Salloukh has never gone out of his way to lend support to USG positions. When presented with a difficult choice, he invariably seeks a means to shift responsibility. He is not widely viewed as a successful government minister and his position in the cabinet would not be secure without Hizballah's support. If there is a cabinet shuffle in near term, we may see a new foreign minister. End comment.  
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